



Athens Olympics: A long jump to the Games

By Kerin Hope

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Greece has taken a qualitative leap forward in what it can show to the world, believes Gianna Angelopoulos-Daskalaki, president of Athoc, the organising body for the Athens Olympic games.

She likes to recall a seminar on Greece that she organised almost 10 years ago at Harvard University. The event brought together Greek and US politicians and economists to consider why individual Greeks were able to excel but successive governments had been unable to modernise Greece's weak institutions and inefficient public administration.

"The thrust was that collectively we weren't competent, that we'd never shown we were able to work as a team," she says. "But that was in the mid-1990s." since then Greece has moved on, she argues.

Mrs Daskalaki believes Greece has solved the problem of teamwork, at least for the Olympics, and will be able to stage a successful games in August. Athoc, with a young and mostly foreign-educated workforce, is setting standards for co-operation among public sector organisations, she says.

Athletes, sports federations and the International Olympic Committee have voiced satisfaction with Athoc's performance in organising test events, in spite of problems with high winds at the junior world rowing championships this summer. The sports venues tested were operated to the required standard and 80 per cent of volunteers - a higher percentage than Sydney - showed up.

"Each of the 60 Olympic venues has become home to a dedicated team - from the security and technology people to the garbage disposal person. It has to be a very disciplined unit but there's still space for individuals to make decisions," she says.

At Athoc Mrs Daskalaki is sandwiched between the International Olympic Committee, which makes regular visits to Athens inspect progress with preparations for the games, and the Socialist government, which is responsible for constructing sports venues and transport systems and managing security for the games.

"This is a once in a lifetime job," she says. "But nobody can prepare you for it because every country has to find its own model for staging the Olympics. The IOC briefs you and is ready to give you expertise but you have to make the decisions."

Mrs Daskalaki, a lawyer from Crete, enjoys skiing but had never been particularly interested in sport before she became involved with organising the games. She goes jogging and cycling to keep in shape,
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but unashamedly lights up a Cuban cigar as she leaves the Athoc building after work.

"When I started, my anxiety level was completely over the top. But you can't do something like this unless you really enjoy it, You have to decide things fast, you have to keep up with details - and if you can do it all with style, that's even better," she says.

The biggest management project she had previously undertaken was the construction of a new family home in Athens. But her background in politics has made the job at Athoc easier. She started in local government, being elected first as an Athens city councillor and later as an MP for an Athens constituency with the centre-right New Democracy party.

Costas Simitis, the prime minister, turned down a suggestion by Juan Samaranch, the former IOC chairman, that Mrs Daskalaki should be made a cabinet minister to help speed decision-making for games-related projects. But she has managed to build alliances with the Socialist ministers who run the Olympic project.

"I know how politicians react because I've been there," she says. "You have to get things done, so you're co-operative. You try to find ways to slow down procedures if they're wrong, correct decisions, or stop mistakes from being made."

Mrs Daskalaki resigned her parliamentary seat after marrying Theo Angelopoulos, a Greek shipping billionaire based in Switzerland. She joined the Angelopoulos family business as a member of the legal team. Her spell at Harvard - she was vice-dean of the John F. Kennedy school of government - turned her into an energetic international networker.

With Mrs Daskalaki chairing the bid committee, Athens narrowly defeated Rome to win the 2004 Olympics, but then fell behind with preparations. Three senior Greek managers with international experience resigned in quick succession before she took over Athoc.

Athoc has grown from 150 to more than 3,000 employees, making Mrs Daskalaki the manager of one of Greece's bigger state enterprises. She moved the organisation out of its downtown premises to a refurbished textile factory in a low-income suburb of Athens and hired her own management team from the private sector.

One of her first moves was to set up a special unit to control Athoc's \$1.9bn budget, covering the Greek share of funds from international broadcasting rights as well as contributions from local sponsors. She keeps in close touch with Athoc's sponsors, bankers and marketing associates.

"The sponsors are a real asset. It's not just the money but the human resources and the technology they make available to you," Mrs Daskalaki says.

While Athoc's budget is tightly controlled, government spending on the games has increased from a projected €2.4bn to more than €4.6bn. The security budget rose sharply after the September 11 attacks in New York, while the rush to complete venues on time has sent construction costs soaring.

Together with her record of pulling Athoc into shape, Mrs Daskalaki's enthusiasm and self-confidence go some way towards reassuring the IOC that Greece will deliver all the Olympic facilities on time.

She admits to being worried about three ambitious construction projects that are running behind

schedule: a 30km suburban rail line that will link the Athens international airport with the main Olympic sports complex; a 23km tramway to carry spectators from the city centre to Olympic venues in southern Athens; and the installation of a metal-and-glass roof over the main Olympic stadium, designed by the Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava.

"These deadlines are looking very tight," she says. "We have to count on the assurances of the government that they'll all be ready in time for us to test them."

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